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Why Malays prefer living in Australia

MELBOURNE: Better education as well as brighter career and business prospects are some of the reasons luring Malays to Australia, according to a leading Malaysian academician now based here.

Dr Ahmad Zaharuddin Sani, from Universiti Utara Malaysia, now an honorary fellow at University of Melbourne's Asia Institute, said Malays here were professionals, including medical practitioners, while many were clerical, sales and service workers.

He said excluding students, the state of Victoria alone had about 5,000 Malays, of which 75 per cent were either permanent residents or Australian citizens.

"The largest number of Malay immigrants arrived in Australia after 1981, either under the family reunion programme or as skilled or business migrants," said Dr Ahmad Zaharuddin.

"This boom (of Malay migration) was also due to a change in policy which allowed overseas students with Australian skills and qualifications to apply for an extension of their stay in Australia.

"It allowed more Malays taking up opportunities given by the Australian Government to stay back a while before deciding their future. There were a number of Malays arriving with the intention of doing their studies and training but ended up staying here," he said.

Dr Ahmad Zaharuddin said Malay settlers here were made up of a small number of engineers and a large number of doctors and medical practitioners who came to Australia for further training.

Intrigued by the number of Malays leaving Malaysia, he undertook research to find the cause.

It resulted in a book titled "Malays in

Victoria" which was initially suggested by Zulkifli Ahmad, who is President of the Victorian Malay Organisation.

The book was released last week by Australian Multicultural Foundation Executive Director, Dr Hass Dellal, during a seminar at the University of Melbourne.

Dr Ahmad Zaharuddin, who obtained his PhD from Universiti Malaya and a Master of Theology degree from University of Nottingham, said there were several other reasons why Malays were leaving the land of their birth for countries such as Australia.

They include enhanced education opportunities for their children abroad (free and quality education); more employment benefits (better pay and working conditions); better healthcare services; and a more secure future for their family despite their ethnicity.

Dr Ahmad Zaharuddin said he was somewhat bothered by some Malays overseas who were reluctant to call themselves Malays.

"I had a Malay friend telling me here that in Southeast Asia he considers himself Malay but in Australia, he's an Australian.

"I have to agree that the term 'Malay' is confusing to non-Malays not familiar with us. I myself don't know how to explain our racial categories or identities to them," said Dr Ahmad Zaharuddin.

"We need to be proud of who and what we are...what makes us special," he added.

He said that religion "for better or for worse, is a major Malay concern".

"In Malaysian politics, that makes it a major national concern. And because the Malay community is associated in a one-to-one relationship with Islam, this has meant that Islam is at the heart of many major political conflicts in the country," he noted.